Ideology exposed — an introduction

by Chuck Kleinhans

In assembling this issue of *Jump Cut* it seemed useful to highlight some articles that dramatize the nature and function of ideology in mainstream media. Of course this has been a major concern of this publication since our first issue in 1974, which included "Genre Films and the Status Quo" and analyses of *The Exorcist, The Last Detail, Badlands*, and Truffaut's *Day for Night*. And equally, we've always given lots of attention to alternative films and video that challenge the dominant ideology.

Michael Pepe's two essays that follow look at some key films about the 2008 financial crisis. He provides an acute view of a major event that still shapes our time, especially in the United States. As the 2016 Presidential race highlights, the effect of the Great Recession, even after a modest recovery, has underlined the longer standing trend of economic inequality for the "middle" classes. Most working Americans and their families face economic stagnation or sliding backward, while the wealthiest have increased their share and prospered.

Pepe astutely points out that few people are equipped to understand the complexities of finance capitalism and the intricacies of credit default swap, but mass entertainment products do address these topical matters and help shape public understanding. It's important to understand this process because it shapes the public memory of what happened, how things stand, and what possibilities are on the horizon. The relative success of Donald Trump at working the fears and anger of ordinary people around issues of immigration, race, religion, and globalized trade is anchored in the economic anxieties of our time, promoting the magical thinking that a simple slogan such as "build a wall," or "deport all illegals," or "ban all Muslims," or "bring back our manufacturing jobs" could actually be implemented.

The suspicion of secretive elites, conspiracies in the highest levels of government, rogue units, and traitors has been fueled by right wing talk radio for decades, confirming a large segment of the population's worst fears. But Hollywood's thriller formula films supply that anxiety an imaginative and visualized narrative for a much larger audience. Right and left can imagine plausible scenarios of cynical and criminal manipulation, be that Hillary Clinton's personal emails or the Benghazi attack or Dick Cheney's masterminding "the dark side" of torture and rendition following 9/11. And screen media, both fictional and documentary, give us ways of seeing such stories. Sometimes these are directly about historical events (recently the O.J. Simpson trial, the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, etc.); sometimes they are displacements or allegories that provide workplace and dinner table topics of conversation (*The Sopranos, Mad Men, Game of Thrones,* etc.). As Emily Nussbaum, *New Yorker* TV critic, has observed, modern water-cooler dramas "often work as an aesthetic Esperanto that lets us talk about politics without fighting about the news."

Ponzi-scheme con men appear as heroic or antiheroic scoundrels in recent works such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *Madoff,* and decidedly skewed portraits of

corporate entrepreneurs have gathered large audiences with films such as *Steve Jobs* and *The Social Network*. The interesting anthology *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film, and Television: Twenty-First-Century Bust Culture* (ed. Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski) broadens the scope with imaginative readings of recent horror such as *Drag Me to Hell, Contagion, Paranormal Activity*, zombie narratives, and the conservative feminism of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. And the writers find economic/social class is at the center of popular television ranging from Tyler Perry's sitcom *Meet the Browns*, the dramas *Treme, Friday Night Lights, Downton Abbey*, and *Falling Skies* to reality shows such as *Hoarders* and *Pickers*.

Pepe's second contribution is a visual essay that broadens the terrain surveyed with a suggestive survey of US cinema's depiction of crime in high places and its social aftermath. This overview is meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive, and it invites our own imaginative connections to depictions of class antagonism in media history ranging from *Metropolis* to *The Hunger Games* or *The Great Gatsby* to *Gattaca*. Susan Sontag's essay, "The Imagination of Disaster" (included in her book *Against Interpretation*) provided a compelling ideological genre study of science fiction disaster films as allegories of the Cold War. More recently ecological catastrophe has joined the anxiety about aliens and earthquakes. Media analyst Douglas Kellner offered fairly close-stitched studies of recent political events and Hollywood film in his book *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Blackwell, 2010). His follow-up, *Media Spectacle and Insurrection 2011: From the Arab Uprisings to Occupy Everywhere* (Bloomsbury 2012), continues the pursuit across the global news apparatus including social media creation and diffusion.

Today, anyone who argues that fears of technological change have evaporated as we proceed into a future of driverless automobiles and smart phone access to the human universe isn't paying attention to the continuing anxieties seen in media about threatening surveillance by corporations and the state or robots discarding weak humans in say, *Her*. Clearly, popular media has thrived in the past few decades with sometimes comic, often darkly pessimistic, and occasionally heroic depictions of characters caught in a web of corporate, corrupting, and disastrous (for the individual and/or society) relations. Witness (in no particular order): *Syriana, Up in the Air, The Insider, Michael Clayton, Children of Men, American Psycho, Elysium, Promised Land, The Constant Gardner, Thank You for Smoking, Fight Club, Avatar, Breaking Bad*.

In a startling analysis of *Straight Outta Compton*, Jeff Menne casts the film about the rise of N.W.A.'s late 1980's success in a new light by positioning it within the context of various films on the 2008 financial crisis and new films on blackness. Rather than the expected story--a reenactment and celebration of the supergroup dominated by musical performance--the film becomes a critique of entertainment business capitalism.

Giving a close dissection of recent Hollywood films, Robert Alpert examines *Zero Dark 30* and Todd McGowan views *Interstellar*. Alpert returns with a study of *Ex Machina* (and then hits a trifecta with his article on the continuing *Hurt Locker* litigation elsewhere in this issue). Furthering the analysis, Scott Krzych takes a close look at the use of stock footage in Citizens United propaganda. Given the remarkable utility of stock images (made with a wonderfully vague and all-purpose communicative function), their actual use in didactic messaging can be stunningly revealing of ideology. (A truth that Trump has repeatedly underlined with social media images such as associating Hillary Clinton with a Jewish Star of David, piles of money, and the word "corrupt.")

Taking a different path, Jeanette Roan considers the psychological and emotional effects of media by asking about the reception by Asian and Asian American viewers of Asian embodiment on camera. Steven Papson adds to the discussion

with a close (and personal) reading of a well-executed TV commercial for Shell Oil. This discussion can be seen as echoing some of the issues of actor embodiment in other sections of this issue, especially the collection of studies of Scarlett Johanssen in *Under the Skin* as well as the section on transgender representations.

Additionally, we are reprinting (with the original illustrations restored) earlier *Jump Cut* articles on *Lady Be Good*. I look at a classic Hollywood montage sequence to unpack the ideological baggage expressed in its formal organization, and Jane Gaines raises the always interesting question, can dogs dance?

Sometimes ideology is exposed in fairly subtle ways, as Sonika Jain points out in discussing two works on women detectives. The lead charcaters are both effective investigators and warm human beings whose compassion inflects the world of crime solving differently: as humanely correctable. Finally, I've added a short overview of some classics of ideological visual analysis: useful for those getting started, and an important refresher for all of us who understand that exposing ideology is one of the key strategies for building an effective citizenship for change.